



Distance Learning 101

A Project IDEAL Online Course for ABE Distance Educators

An Introduction for Trainers

Educators in your state are embarking on a new approach to reaching adult learners. Like other innovations in education this one requires that they engage in professional development to identify, practice, and refine the skills required to be effective in their new role.

It is difficult for teachers to get released time from their teaching duties to engage in face-to-face professional development. The Project IDEAL Support Center has developed a “virtual classroom” that allows educators to further their professional development without taking significant time away from their job. For a period of 6-8 weeks they study 2-4 hours a week at times of their own choosing. They read, complete assignments on the Web, and discuss issues electronically with colleagues around the state.

The virtual classroom contains a calendar, a library of assignments and resources, and an asynchronous discussion forum. During the course these tools are configured to serve the needs of the course. When the course is finished they are reconfigured to provide teachers with resources and tools to support their ongoing effort to implement distance education.

While Project IDEAL staff designed the core resources for the course, its life as a professional development tool depends on one or more trainers from a state giving the online community its life. Before providing guidance in how best to do this, it is useful to know the expectations that teachers have been given regarding the course.

Excerpt from the Educator’s Study Guide

The online course *Distance Learning 101: Recruiting and Teaching Adult Learners at a Distance* is designed for adult educators interested in preparing to offer classes at a distance for ABE, ASE, or ESL adults. Teaching at a distance is quite different from classroom teaching. For most educators it is the equivalent to reinventing the classroom. Administrators and teachers alike need to add many new skills to their repertoire. They need to learn how to identify learners who are likely prospects for independent study – not every adult in need of further education is a good prospect for independent study. They need to develop unique orientation programs to teach learners how to study in a less structured environment. And they need to develop teaching strategies to support learners engaged in studying at a distance – strategies that will maximize the possibilities that learners will reach their learning goals.

This online course is intended for teachers and administrators who are already skilled at delivering classroom-based adult education. It contains a variety of exercises to

help educators through the reinvention process. Each exercise provides a structured opportunity to reflect on four aspects of distance delivery – recruitment, orientation, teaching, and assessment – and develop strategies to handle each one.

Pursued over a 6-8 week period, the course can help educators prepare for their new roles, but it is only a start. To refine their skills they will need to practice and learn which strategies are most appropriate to reach and support the distance learners in their community. This process is best done in collaboration with other educators, each of whom contributes to the discovery of best practices in the field. When the course is over, the course Web site is transformed into a collaborative workspace that participants can continue to use to discuss new ideas and share documents describing best practices (e.g., recruitment brochures, orientation agendas, and teaching tips).

One of the most important functions of the online course is to provide an opportunity for distance educators to experience what it is like to study at a distance. Experiencing the limitations of asynchronous communication built on textual exchanges will help each participant invent strategies to overcome the limitations of this form of education.

The course is designed with several instructional products in mind, including *Crossroads Café*, *GED Connection*, *PLATO*, *SkillsTutor*, and *Workplace Essential Skills*. These are some of the products that Project IDEAL member states have used to teach at a distance. But the instructional principles apply to teaching almost any product at a distance.

The Trainer's Role

The trainer is the instructor for the online course. The trainer has many functions to fill and they vary over time.

Before the Course

- Tailor the state's online community to meet local needs
- Lead a workshop where participants learn how to use the course website
- Schedule course activities & discussions

During the Course

- Respond to submitted assignments
- Initiate and facilitate discussions
- Encourage reflection on the experience itself
- Monitor community life

After the Course

- Adjust the website to support ongoing growth of the community of distance teachers
- Facilitate ongoing discussions among distance teachers